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The Gallantry of Form

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Mayflies[*] brings us 464 new lines of poetry from about twelve years in the making, which must be close to the quintessence of a slim volume of verse. Several translations are added—another 400 lines—without which it would have been a slim volume indeed, under forty pages. Perhaps we don't need many Richard Wilburs, but it is some kind of wonder to have this one.

For here is as lapidary a poet as we have recently known who, assuming his interviews are to be trusted, hardly revises at all. He "does not revise," he almost brings himself to say, instead he lingers with the poem in his mind, at whatever moment of advance it has achieved, and he contemplates, meditates, and listens for the next line until he is sure of it. Then he sets it down and looks ahead. He has so much respect for writing, he explains on one occasion, that he can hardly let himself put a line down of which he is unsure. "Revision," then, is all but entirely an internal affair, an attentiveness to the hum of his own working mind. And to the words, to all the possible words.

For given poems of rhyme and meter, Wilbur's listening will require in large part attending to the possibilities each tactic suggests. It would be the poet's duty, he explains, to inventory many and approve one. His mind must sit in judgment over the next increment of sense and sound conjoining. Rhyme and meter become spurs to invention, causing wildly improbable offerings to rear up from line to line. These he must give rein to before reining most in. Stevens was famous for sitting in the dark, alone, for hours, "thinking." Or so he explained himself to his daughter. "What are you doing, Daddy?" "Thinking," he replied. Wilbur, it would seem, has long cultivated that practice.

It is difficult to imagine a poem under way, a poem with a narrative or expository line as most of Wilbur's carry, in which the hesitation between lines might frequently extend for days and that the poem, when completed, appear seamless. That being the case, one special value of the poems would appear to reside largely in what they come to, what they say and their way of saying it, toward their ends. We can admire other features, as for example three poems in variations of a new stanza form—quatrains of one trimeter and three pentameter lines, the trimeter first in one case, last in another, then first again in a rhymed rather than unrhymed stanza—but those endings will carry

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[*]New York: Harcourt Inc., 2000.

weight. In several instances in the present volume, Wilbur's endings are masterful, and I would urge those poems on all future anthologies.

Take for example "For C." Wilbur explains that this is an anniversary poem, after many anniversaries. Wilbur raises the stakes for himself by taking on poetry's least glamorous task, writing a love poem in praise of half a century of faithfulness. So the five-stanza poem begins by imagining the tempestuous partings this couple has not had to endure. The fourth stanza turns away from the melodramas that quicken most romance with, "We are denied, my love, their fine tristesse," that last word deftly placing their "loss." Then the final stanza makes a claim for what they have gained and comes to rest on the couplet that will allow the poem to endure. What they enjoy, Wilbur ventures, "has the quality of something made," an evaluation he can only underscore by making something fresh himself, in the very next lines, letting us see what has been achieved, not just hear the proclamation of it:

> Like a good fiddle, like the rose's scent,
> Like a rose window or the firmament.

It is a conceit, like "My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow," or "His delights / Were dolphin-like: they showed his back above / The element they liv'd in." Conceits are a touch outrageous—Cleopatra herself as the "element" Antony lived in—a touch self-mocking—"vegetable love"—but also a touch-and-a-half serious. Their aplomb earns our smiling assent. Wilbur's lines enter that company with their swift movement from fiddle to firmament, through two sensual apprehensions of a rose, one natural, the other, like these lines, lovingly handmade.

Another poem that arrives at a fine conclusion is the longest original poem in the collection. In each of his last several books, Wilbur has included one moderately lengthy, blank verse poem—"Walking to Sleep," "The Mind-Reader," "Lying," and now "This Pleasing Anxious Being," divided into three sections of a page each and the shortest of the four. Each section is an autobiographical vignette, steeped in the nostalgia of childhood, but with the mortal stakes increasing. The first ends on a note of impatience to be off from the dinner table to play. The second arrives at recognizing how a painter at the beach seeks "out of all those waves to build a wave / That shall in blue summation break forever," which is no mean analogy to the poem but offered with no flourish to underscore the fact. The final one recalls a Christmas journey with snow falling on the windshield of the family car likened to

"earth tossed down upon a coffin-lid." For a dozen lines, Wilbur works against the anxiousness of that image, the "pluck and gaiety" of the parents trying to allay the vulnerability of the family on the road. In retrospect, though, that moment allows him to foresee the synoptic trajectory of his life, as the car surging through the storm suggests

> The steady chugging of a landing craft
> Through morning mist to the bombarded shore,
> Or the deft prow that dances through the rocks
> In the white water of the Allagash,
> Or, in good time, the bedstead at whose foot
> The world will swim and flicker and be gone.

"Swim and flicker" bring all three images together with the car's struggle through a surf of snow. The shift from action to acceptance in the last lines recalls Cavafy's Antony, not passing away, but watching Alexandria pass away from him.

A slighter poem in the volume contrasts two ways of taking "things as they really are." The "realistic" way sees the world as an unused coloring book and is a view of desolation. The other insists that "the heart's crayon spangle and fulfill" an otherwise colorless world. The childishness of the imagery may stress the desperation of the struggle, and the gallantry of this work insists that there is something worth our spangling no matter how much evidence to the contrary weighs on us.

One reason for Wilbur's translations may be to savor and preserve in English bits of spangle others have offered, when Wilbur notices them. So two poems by the Bulgarian poet Valeri Petrov, one of which tells of Nazi photographs, "Full face and profile," of victims steadily facing us, though ready for "a gallows-rope next day," and the viewer's "fancy that these men / Have looked once deep into our eyes, / And turned their faces from us." Petrov and Wilbur redeem the color by using what can be salvaged of the victims of those who sought to deny it.

The title poem reaffirms this difficult desire. A meditation on a swarm of mayflies finds their meaning in togetherness, like "a crowd / Of stars," and brings the speaker to see himself "In a life too much my own, / More mortal in my separateness than they"—with this qualification, less fashionable in late twentieth century thought than fidelity in marriage:

Unless, I thought, I had been called to be
    Not fly or star
But one whose task is joyfully to see
How fair the fiats of the caller are.

Joyfully and in full color, in spite of Wilbur's weathering many pallid days when conviction drives against that chance.

Another of my nominations for anthologies to come is "Zea," that is maize or corn. Wilbur knows his corn and describes the stalk in nine rhyming-haiku stanzas as an expression of withering age, and, perhaps, to poetry as he has known and loved it. "Once the fruit is picked," the poem begins, defeat and dwindling are its story. Now the only triumph is through attenuation to

Days of an utter
Calm, in which one white corn-leaf
Oddly aflutter,

Its fabric sheathing
A gaunt stem, can seem to be
The sole thing breathing.

Desire ebbs but endures, not fighting, but breathing, filling one's allotted space, standing to a purpose while making the least possible claim for importance. There is a special gallantry in that, and perhaps some hard won understanding, both by the man and by the poet.

D.H.